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Women and the Republican Party, 1854-1924

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Women and the Republican Party, 1854–1924, by Melanie Susan Gustafson. Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001. ix, 288 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. $34.95 cloth.

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It says something about the distance that women's history still has to travel that Melanie Gustafson's book is the first full-length treatment of women in the Republican Party from its founding through the Progressive Era. Gustafson gives us a broad-brush approach to the struggles, disappointments, and occasional successes experienced by Republican women activists. Drawing on an impressive range of secondary and primary sources, Edwards stresses specific causal arguments and narrative details over more in-depth and theoretically informed analysis. Along with a clear, forceful style that features stories of individual women activists, the book provides a fine introduction to the generations of women who worked to make a place for themselves within the often resistant male-dominated culture of the Republican Party. The very sweep of the story sometimes blurs the specificity of state and local politics, however; those hoping to learn more about these topics might do better to visit the regionally oriented studies that support much of Gustafson's work.

The book follows a largely chronological narrative, beginning with the founding of the Republican Party amidst the antislavery crucible leading up to the Civil War. After establishing the importance of the upstart party to abolitionist women newly awakened to issues of women's rights, Gustafson traces the strategies of different activists trying to balance issues of racial equality, women's rights, and party loyalty. Familiar historical actors such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are joined by less well-known women such as Anna Dickenson and longtime Iowa activist J. Ellen Foster, both of whom were prominent in their time. Foster's attempts to fend off challenges from Prohibition Party advocates in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and then to make the most of the Progressive Republicans' turn toward "good government" is a key part of the story. Again, the book focuses its narrative on Foster's role on the national stage rather than her efforts in Iowa, where she was a prominent leader of the state's WCTU (and helped convince it to be the only state to challenge the national organization's affiliation with the Prohibition Party). Still, anyone interested in a more complex understanding of the Republican Party's influence in Iowa during this period will benefit from this book.

With the Progressive Period, the book gets meatier and the analysis more gripping (the years 1910–1924 take up over half the book). Here we find progressive women activists making difficult decisions within the shifting worlds of social and political reform, as they come to realize that "social policy—formerly the province of women's voluntary work—had become public policy. As men took up what had been women's issues and causes, and as the issues themselves evolved in the changing social and political structures, women were increasingly 'shut out' . . . but they were also increasingly interested in new ways to directly influence policy." This shift of perception helped women reimagine their role in partisan politics in the years to come. The chapter on the 1912 campaign of the Progressive Party, which had split off from its conservative GOP counterpart, is the first time the book deals convincingly with the intersection of race with women's politics. Jane Addams's attempt to balance her own strong antiracist position with that of her racist allies (such as the party's standard bearer, Theodore Roosevelt) makes particularly compelling reading. That campaign also finally convinced women's activists to embrace partisanship. That decision gave rise to an entirely new approach, one that insisted on a women's "party" (the National Women's Party) to put forward a women-centered agenda that its advocates believed the male-dominated parties would forever ignore. The book ends quickly after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing woman suffrage, making some note of the Republican ascension afterwards but generally avoiding the questions arising from women's participation in the early 1920s. The real "conclusion" seems to come a few pages earlier, in the section on "Nonpartisanship: Vice or Virtue?" which offers a suitably complex and somewhat open assessment of this continuing conundrum.

Gustafson's book offers readers a strong narrative overview, but it is far less successful at engaging other historians' analyses and interpretations. In fact, historians are almost never credited with providing anything other than primary source material, and it is impossible to distinguish the ideas of past scholars from Gustafson's own. For example, both Rebecca Edwards's *Angel in the Machinery* and my own book provide a much more negative analysis of Ellen Foster's fight for "non-partisanship" within the WCTU. Some engagement with alternative interpretations would have created a more complexly rendered understanding of the difficult decisions facing women who had to balance a number of different loyalties and passions. Still, the broad strokes rendered by Gustafson might offset the potential benefits of a more finely shaded portrait.